

# Attacking Child Hunger

**HOW DO YOU SPOT CHILDHOOD HUNGER?** The signs aren't always obvious – maybe an offhand “Are you going to eat that?” at lunch, or a request for an extra snack in the classroom. Yet hunger is real and happens every day in our community.

**PROBLEM:** Children who struggle with Hunger are more likely to experience:

- Sickness and hospitalization
- Headaches, stomach aches, cold, ear Infections and fatigue
- Lack of self esteem
- Increased behavioral, emotional and academic problems
- Obesity and diabetes
- Increased absenteeism
- Lower grades

**THE NEED:** 29% of school children (51,000) in Duval County go without 3 meals a day, food insecurity and hunger is a very real problem. During the school week, most of these children depend on the federal free and reduced meal program their school offers. Sometimes, the meals at school are the only ones they get. When the school closes its doors on Friday afternoon, many of these children go home to empty cupboards and empty bellies—some for the entire 65 hours. Hungry children return to class quiet, lethargic and too undernourished to focus on learning. **Who will feed them this weekend?**

**STRATEGY:** The Outreach Council identified Blessings in a Backpack, a national recognized weekend nutrition program already engaged in Duval and surrounding counties to alleviate child hunger as an organization that has delivered this program for the last seven years in the area. Using Blessings guidance, St. Johns has partnered with Hendricks Avenue Elementary School to address the weekend nutritional needs of the children receiving federally funded free or reduced school lunch (families at or below the Federal Poverty Level) by providing nutritional food for the weekend during the school year (38 weeks). Low income children are more likely to be behind academically or at risk of falling behind their peers. As teachers will attest, the learning gap is very real.

A nutritional package of food that takes into consideration dairy, protein, and sugar content is provided to a child for the weekend. At a minimum the package contains two breakfast items, two entrée items, and two healthy snacks. We plan to send home double rations for the Easter holiday. Food is packed in plastic bags that can fit into a child's backpack.

Presently 70 children are participating in the program, with celephane food packets temporarily supplied by Sysco, a national BIB vendor. As St. John's volunteers phase in the program, we will be able to provide food items that are the same as those they

see in their local grocery. We believe that this will appeal to more parents and the number of children to be served will continue to increase. The Publix on University Avenue will become the primary vendor. Publix is committed to this program has provided leadership on the Florida Board of Blessings in a Backpack.

The Outreach Council plans to launch our packing activity at the school beginning March 2.

**PROGRESS SO FAR:** A volunteer school liaison has established relationships with the principal and counselors as they identify the children who would benefit by the program. The liaison will also maintain the number of children to be served and work with the assistant manager at Publix to assure all nutritional guidelines are met for the items to be packed each week. She will serve as general eyes and ears for progress of the program at the school and conduct an end of the year Teacher Survey of the program.

**VOLUNTEER NEEDS** Initially the volunteer school liaison along with other Outreach Council members will be responsible for recruiting a volunteer coordinator and volunteer packing teams. A minimum of 4 packers are needed for a weekly team. An ideal approach would be a first, second, third week packing team. (All Saints Episcopal Church has asked to pack one week each month to explore this possibility for their parish in the following year.) The teams will pack the weekend food items and ensure that they are delivered to each classroom. Blessings estimates for the 70 children we are now serving this would entail 45 minutes to an hour.

**IMPACT:** Blessings in a Backpack has partnered with Quaker Oats and Ipsos, a leading global market research company, to develop a national evaluation project that measures program impact on a deeper level than bags and pounds of food distributed. This multi-year project will involve various Blessings' stakeholders, such as children and teachers, in the evaluation process.

During the first year of the project, student surveys found that, in addition to no longer feeling weekend hunger pangs, children fed by Blessings experience the following impact on their lives:

- 59% find it is easier to learn at school.
- 60% do not get in trouble as much.
- 78% feel cared for by their community.
- 71% feel they are helping their family.
- 60% of children report that their school attendance is better.

**INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE AND PARTICIPATING IN THIS MEANINGFUL EFFORT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR A HUNGRY CHILD.** We would like to discuss this program further with you. We are seeking committed high energy folks, please call in the evenings Laura Lane at 904-305-6400 or Joan Burchell 434-465-1235. Be sure to leave a message if we are unable to answer immediately.

